5-4-1999

# Mathias, Charles McCurdy, Jr. oral history interview

Don Nicoll

# Interview with Charles McCurdy Mathias, Jr. by Don Nicoll

*Summary Sheet and Transcript*

**Interviewee**
Mathias, Charles McCurdy, Jr.

**Interviewer**
Nicoll, Don

**Date**
May 4, 1999

**Place**
Washington, DC

**ID Number**
MOH 099



## Biographical Note

Charles McCurdy Mathias, Jr. was born July 24, 1922 in Frederick, Maryland. In 1942, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. While there, he served as Captain in the Naval Reserve. He went to college at Yale and then to Haverford in 1944. He received a law degree from the University of Maryland Law School in 1949. He practiced law in Frederick, Maryland and served as a Representative and Senator of Maryland. From 1953 to 1954, he was the Assistant Attorney General of Maryland. Several years later, he was a member of the Maryland House of Delegates and was elected to the Eighty-seventh Congress as a Republican. At the time of this interview he lived in Chevy Chase, Maryland and he practiced law in Washington, D.C.

## Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: political involvement and history; memories of Ed Muskie; the sense of civility in Congress; Iranian hostage crisis; U.S. Navy memories; civil rights and environmental issues in the Senate; and Muskie's style, personality and characteristics.

## Indexed Names

Cooper, John Sherman, 1901-
Hart, Philip A. (Philip Aloysius), 1912-1976
Hoover, Herbert, 1874-1964
Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
Kennedy, John F. (John Fitzgerald), 1960-1999
Mansfield, Mike, 1903-2001
Mathias, Charles McCurdy, Jr.
Muskie, Edmund S., 1914-1996
Nicoll, Don
Nixon, Richard M. (Richard Milhous), 1913-1994
Scott, Hugh

**Transcript**

**Senator Mathias:** . . . "up from the meadows rich with corn, clear in the cool September morn, the clustered spires of Frederick stand, green-walled by the hills of Maryland." *["Ballad of Barbara Fritchie"]*

**Don Nicoll:** That was Senator Mathias, formerly senator from Maryland and a colleague of Senator Muskie. We are interviewing him in his law firm in Washington, D.C. on the afternoon of May 4th, 1999. The interviewer is Don Nicoll. Senator Mathias, you came to the United States Senate in 1969, as I recall; is that correct?

**CM:** That's correct.

**DN:** And Ed Muskie had been there at that point for ten years. Do you remember your first impressions of him?

**CM:** Well I think I had met him earlier because I was serving in the House and we had had some interchange. Plus the fact that he was in a sense my senator because we have a house on the island of Isle au Haut. And so I looked to him for constituent services.

**DN:** That's a beautiful place to have a home.

**CM:** It is a very beautiful place.

**DN:** How long have you been going to Isle au Haut?

**CM:** Well, it really was a part of my nuptial contract. My wife had gone there for her entire life and she said that if she was going to live in Maryland, she would have to have a respite in the summer at Isle au Haut. And so that became part of our basic agreement.

**DN:** She had her priorities straight and you knew a good thing when you found her. Now, you had, had you talked much with Senator Muskie in the time that you were in the House?

**CM:** Oh I don't think we had any profound conversations. We'd greet each other in passing and, but obviously I got to know a good deal about him. And he was one of the people who made sense and who was generally looked up to. And so I was always happy to see him.

**DN:** When had you first gotten involved in politics?

**CM:** Well I recall carrying a Herbert Hoover placard in 1932 when I was ten years old. It was, that was a tough way to get started in that year.

**DN:** And had you maintained an interest in politics in your growing up after you were ten?

**CM:** Yes.

**DN:** Was your family involved in politics?

**CM:** They were, not in any immediate direct sense, but they were very interested and it was a large part of conversation around the dinner table. So it was a rather natural evolution for me.

**DN:** And you had graduated from Haverford in 1944 as I recall.

**CM:** Well, you're right, I got a degree in '44. In fact, I left Haverford in '42 and joined up. And Haverford did a very generous thing. They counted up what I, some of the Navy training I had and called it college credits and gave me a degree in '44.

**DN:** So you didn't have to go back and . . .

**CM:** So I didn't have to go back.

**DN:** And then you went on to law school.

**CM:** Yes, I had, some of the Navy training I got was at Yale so that made it acceptable for Haverford to take the Yale credits. And then I went on to the University of Maryland Law School.

**DN:** And how soon after that did you run for public office yourself?

**CM:** Not until 1958, but I had several political appointments in the interim. I served as assistant attorney general of Maryland and as the city attorney at Frederick, Maryland, so that they were sort of warm ups and kept getting me more and more involved.

**DN:** And then in '58 you ran for the House?

**CM:** In '58 I ran for the Maryland legislature in the house of delegates. And one, I was the only Republican, the only new Republican elected to the legislature that year. It was a very bad year for Republicans in Maryland and the Republican membership of the legislature sank to its lowest level since the Civil War.

**DN:** So you bucked the tide that year.

**CM:** And that had what was probably a disproportionate effect and I was able to run for Congress two years later, and that's how I got to Congress.

**DN:** And you won election to Congress in the election when President [John F.] Kennedy was elected, so again bucking a tide. When you were in the House, what committees did you serve on?

**CM:** Judiciary, Post Office and Civil Service, and of course the District of Columbia Committee which was necessary as a representative from Maryland.

**DN:** And from then, so you served for eight years in the House, '61 to '69, and when you went to the Senate what committees did you serve on?

**CM:** Well again Judiciary, and the equivalent of the Post Office and the Civil Service which is the Operations Committee. I later moved over to the Appropriations Committee and to the Foreign Relations Committee, and also Intelligence and finally on the Rules Committee.

**DN:** So you covered considerable territory over the years. And you and Senator Muskie both served and served together on Government Operations and the Foreign Relations Committee.

**CM:** That's right.

**DN:** Did you have a lot of occasions to work on tough legislation together during that period?

**CM:** Yes, I recall working very closely with him on a number of things. It's hard to recall at this moment the precise subjects but we had no problem in working together on these matters.

**DN:** What was the mood in the Senate during those years? You came in at a tough political time when we think of the [Richard M.] Nixon administration and all the controversy around the Watergate in particular, and you were on the Judiciary Committee through that era. But while all of that was going on what was the mood in the Senate among the senators?

**CM:** Well I would say it was a very, I don't know whether "harmonious" is the right word, but it was, it really was harmonious. There were not any great partisan infighting. There was a very proper division between the parties and it was clear Republicans and Democrats weren't going to vote for the same thing necessarily. But by the same token there was a great deal of comradeship and a sense of belonging to an important institution and an institutional factor that bound the Senate together. Senator [Mike] Mansfield as the majority leader was just as courteous and fair to Republican members as he was to Democratic members and that sort of set the tone. And I could enjoy a conversation with Ed Muskie as well as with any Republican; there was no human difference between the parties. There was policy difference in some things but it wasn't carried to the extent to which I think it's now carried.

**DN:** Do you have a sense as to why it was different then than it is today, than what it is today?

**CM:** Well it's, I'm tempted to say it was the people. You had people like Phil Hart, John Sherman Cooper[1], Ed Muskie's typical, Hugh Scott[2], people who really got along with their colleagues; didn't seek fights with them all the time. They could joust very vigorously, but it didn't . . . there wasn't a meanness about it. It was all done with, I can't say with a light heart because they took the business seriously, but with a light touch.

**DN:** And in that environment, do you recall what some of the tougher issues were that you resolved as committee members and members of the Senate at large?

**CM:** Well we had some very tough civil rights votes, and then we got into the Vietnam situation and that was extremely difficult. And there were tough votes on many subjects. The Cold War was raging and we had votes on how to handle various issues that dealt with the Soviet Union. We had Middle Eastern votes that were extremely difficult; whether we should sell equipment to the Saudis. So we had no shortage of serious problems.

**DN:** You and Senator Muskie were on the Foreign Relations Committee and had to deal with, particularly toward the end of the '70s, with the whole hostage crisis that led him into the Secretary of State's position. Do you recall what it was like on that committee coping with the hostage crisis and how you and he might have had interchanges?

**CM:** Well the hostage crisis was a very difficult time. The pressure was building up from the country as to what we were going to do about it and it took a very clear head to cope with that. I just saw Bruce Langhorn today who was one of the hostages and was thinking about his experiences. I sat across the table from him. It was a time that we, it was a time that we didn't know exactly what to do, I mean, we could have gotten the hostages killed if we had moved in one direction. We couldn't get them released under any reasonable terms, couldn't negotiate with the religious fervor that was existing in Iran, and it was at a time like that that Ed Muskie was very valuable.

**DN:** How did he, do you recall how he tackled issues like that in relation to colleagues, or some of the discussions you may have had?

**CM:** My recollection is that he was one who would always say, "Well let's examine it; let's sit down and take a look at it" and, rather than jumping off a cliff at the very beginning. You mentioned his passage to the Department of State. I used to kid him about that because it takes a lot of trouble to be elected a United States Senator. And I think most people would agree with that, that it's hard to be elected to the Senate. But not many people recognize how hard it is to get out of the Senate with grace and with dignity. You can of course leave the Senate in a coffin

---

[1] John Sherman Cooper (1901-1991), U.S. Senator from Kentucky 1946-49, 1952-55, 1956-73, Republican.

[2] Hugh Doggett Scott (1900-1994), U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania 1959-77, Republican.

or you can leave in an electoral defeat, but to leave on your own feet, standing upright, is not all that easy. And I used to tell Ed that he was the most successful of any member of the Senate in his departure to go from the Senate to be Secretary of State; that was a perfect way to leave.

**DN:** Now you left with grace and dignity on your own terms.

**CM:** Well, not with the kind of *éclat* that Ed achieved.

**DN:** Did senators look on that move by him as reflecting credit on the institution?

**CM:** Yes, I think it was a very popular move. I don't remember whether he had announced that he wasn't going to run again, but I think it was assumed that he probably wouldn't. And so it wasn't as if we were going to be deprived of his presence by virtue of the appointment. But it was a kind of a happy ending for both sides. In fact, now that you mention it I remember I talked to him. One day he and I went to Annapolis and I can't remember for the life of me what we went to Annapolis about but we went together. And driving down there we were talking about life and he said that at the end of his second term he very nearly retired from the Senate; that he had done everything that you could do. He had introduced bills, he had chaired committees, he had gone through all the exercises that the Senate offers and he didn't foresee anything very new and fresh ahead of him and he was really thinking about retirement. And then he got the presidential urge and that caused him to reconsider and to run again.

**DN:** Did you ever have the feeling that Ed Muskie was a person with a career plan?

**CM:** No, I never really thought of that. He seemed to just go from point to point floating on the wave. But I, if you look back on his career you can see some elements of sequential actions; the governorship and then the Senate.

**DN:** As you dealt with him over the years, you must have had some disagreements.

**CM:** Well I'm sure we did, and I'm sure we didn't have identical voting records by any means. But I don't recall any particularly strong differences we had. On environmental questions I think we would have been quite similar; with civil rights questions we would have been very similar. Some of the Vietnam questions we might have had some differences, but I don't recall any. I would think our voting records were pretty close.

**DN:** In spite of the fact that you were from different parties.

**CM:** Yes, and somewhat different parts of the country. Both east coast but the flavor is a little different in Maryland than in Maine.

**DN:** Considerably. I was thinking as you talk that you started out in a sense as a constituent of Ed Muskie's; he was in turn a constituent of yours.

**CM:** He was very considerate; he never called on me for constituent services. Other members did. I had one member who lived near Ed Muskie who called me up one day and said, "I'm in

trouble". And I said, "Well what's wrong?" And he said. "My water's turned off," he said, AI was in the shower getting, taking a shower and the water went off." And I said, "Well that's terrible". And he said, "Yes, what's worse is that Lyndon Johnson's coming for dinner in half an hour."

**DN:** You took care of it.

**CM:** We took care of it; within half an hour we had his water running again. But Ed never availed himself of that.

**DN:** Now you are from Frederick, Maryland and that's, it used to be a fairly rural part of the state.

**CM:** Yes, the biggest income, biggest single source of income in Frederick in those days was the milk check, dairy farmers.

**DN:** So it was not, in economic terms it was not unlike a good part of Maine.

**CM:** That's true.

**DN:** Did you find that your constituents and people you encountered in Maine were similar?

**CM:** Well in some very basic ways, yes. The people who lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains, there where Camp David now is, spoke in a little different accent than the people in Down East Maine. But in many of their basic ways of life they were quite similar; hard work, careful, prudent. I think there was a lot of similarity.

**DN:** Did you find that as you and Senator Muskie talked about constituent needs, even though there were obvious differences between Maryland and Maine, that you were in some ways working from a common base? Or were you faced with very different problems?

**CM:** No, I think they were quite similar. Education was one of the problems. We had all sorts of esoteric debates about whether you should have federal aid for bricks and mortar or whether you should have federal aid for curriculum, whether you should have federal aid for teachers and that became very heated at times. And these were the kind of things we shared.

**DN:** Were there other issues on which you had extended discussions and debates about federal policy?

**CM:** I have a recollection of discussing various environmental problems. And we had some common interest there because the Chesapeake Bay was a big source of seafood and of course the coast of Maine has a big source of seafood, and there were some common problems. We didn't have the question of Canadian poachers, but the other aspects of it were quite similar.

**DN:** Now did you work on the budget legislation?

**CM:** Not primarily. I got into budget questions when it got to the floor but not at the committee stage.

**DN:** Not the structure of the budget. As you look back on the group of House members, Senate members, who came to the Congress after WWII and you think about what you'd been through (the Depression, the war), how much do you think that had to do with the kind of comity that you've mentioned in the House and the Senate at that time?

**CM:** I think it probably had some effect because we had shared that experience. I mean, it may have been that we were in different theaters of war and different parts of the services but it was an experience that we shared; it was an experience of our generation. And for myself I've always said I think that, notwithstanding I have been fortunate to go to some great educational institutions, but that where I really learned the most was in the United States Navy.

**DN:** And what was it you learned there that was so important?

**CM:** I learned a good deal about myself. I remember one night we were out in the Philippines and we were moored and it was a stormy night. Boats were bouncing around on the waves, and I reached up for a Jacobs ladder that was hanging over the stern and waving in the wind and caught this Jacobs ladder and pulled myself up on it out of the boat. And as I went up the ladder I thought, "Well if I can do this I can do anything." So that was a great moment.

**DN:** And you've obviously remembered that over the years.

**CM:** I remember some other things. When I was first enlisted and I was apprentice seaman and we were in sort of makeshift quarters (had been an old beach cottage), and the septic system was obviously not adequate for a couple hundred men who were living in a one-family cottage. And so they gave me a bucket and a pair of boots and said, "Get down and get it cleaned out." And I cursed under my breath that, "They ought to get somebody to do this." And it slowly came to me that they had gotten me to do it; they had somebody to do it. And everything has been upward for me since that moment.

**DN:** What were some of the high points of your service in theSenate and in the House?

**CM:** Well the civil rights movement is really one of the high points; when I consider that it was a tremendous revolution. When I was young I knew men and women who had been slaves and they told me about their experiences in slavery. And when I came to the Congress in 1961 we still had segregation in many parts of the country, and legal segregation. And by the end of the civil rights reform movement we had stricken off all of these encrustations of segregation law and made a difference. It didn't solve the problem entirely but it made a big difference in removing these legal obstacles. And I think that was a revolution that was of real importance to the country, and I think all of us who joined in that effort can take some satisfaction from it. People sometimes say to me, "What are you most proud of; what's your favorite accomplishment?" And I say, "That's like asking which was my favorite child." It's hard to say because you focus almost exclusively on a single subject when you're trying to get it enacted and then you move on to other things.

**DN:** But civil rights was one of the high points for you.

**CM:** Civil rights certainly was one of the high points. The environmental issues which I shared with Ed were another because it, that was a total revolution in another sense. When I first went to the Congress, if anybody had introduced legislation dealing with energy, with electricity for example, public utility companies, I would have been run out of town by the public utility officers because that was not the government's business; that was the electric power companies'. Or if anybody had introduced a bill to prevent the extinction of a species of bird, they'd have been referred to the Audubon Society in those days. And now Congress just routinely deals with subjects like that.

**DN:** As someone who participated in those kinds of revolutions in the life of the country through the Senate, what do you think were Ed Muskie's principal contributions?

**CM:** Well he, number one he took the initial steps to move into this area. As I said, Congress simply didn't deal with the environment. That was an area of private preserve and people thought they could do what they wanted with their own property without regard for the effect on their neighbors. And I think the most significant thing Ed did was to break the path to move into this area and it made all of the other work that had to be done possible. So that was a significant contribution.

**DN:** Do you have any vivid memories of Ed? You mentioned one, your drive to Annapolis. Any vivid memories of him relating to his colleagues or leading on an issue?

**CM:** Well I remember him, I can't tell you the exact time or place but he was very good in dealing with people in foreign situations. We were together on some mission, I have a feeling it was in the Soviet Union. But he was, of course he was big and tall and had a commanding appearance. And he would go into these gatherings in foreign countries and he stood out in the crowd and attracted respect, and I recall that very vividly.

**DN:** Were you and he together on the trip with Senator Mansfield and others in the midst of the Vietnam War?

**CM:** No, I remember the trip you mention but I was not on it.

**DN:** But you were on other overseas trips.

**CM:** Other trips together.

**DN:** Did he influence your career or were you pretty well set in terms of your own approach to politics?

**CM:** Well it was a learning experience and I'm sure he did influence my thinking. There's no guidebook on how to be a member of Congress. It's a day-to-day learning experience and I think you learn more from your colleagues than from any other source there would be. The ones

who seem to act with reason and rationality and who are able to maintain their human contacts I think set an example that's of real importance.

**DN:** Are there any other comments about your own service or the Senate or of Senator Muskie that you'd like to leave with us in this interview?

**CM:** I was struck at the time of Senator Muskie's funeral at the number of his colleagues who made the effort to get there. It was a great example of the kind of warmth that he created within the Senate. There were Republicans and Democrats who showed up and I think it's one of the largest gatherings of members of the Senate that I have witnessed. I think they could have gotten a quorum if they'd called the roll. But that was a testimony to the way people felt about Ed Muskie. And he was rigid on ethical questions. I recall that he took a very straight line; no short-cutting. And so that appearance of integrity I think deepened the respect in which he was held.

**DN:** Thank you very much.

**CM:** Well thank you for being so patient.

**DN:** Oh, those are marvelous insights into him.

*End of Interview*